

EMORY AIDS INTERNATIONAL TRAINING AND RESEARCH PROGRAM

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Carlos del Rio, MD, PI/Director

Tel: 404.616.6779/ E-mail: cdelrio@emory.edu

Susan Allen, MD, MPH Associate Director

Tel: 404.727.7883/ E-mail: sallen5@sph.emory.edu

www.sph.emory.edu/AITRP

Frances H. Priddy, MD, MPH, Associate Director

Tel: 404.377.6369 x 14 / E-mail: fpriddy@emory.edu

Maria Sullivan, Program Coordinator

Tel: 404.727.8797 / Fax: 404.727.4590 / E-mail: masulli@sph.emory.edu

DEAR TRAINEES AND FRIENDS:

The azaleas and dogwoods are blooming in Atlanta which means that spring is here and graduation is now around the corner. Those of you who finished the program at Emory remember how hectic that time was, with thesis deadlines coming up and the uncertainty of moving on to a new stage of life occurring at the same time.

This year has not been as stressful for our program since only one long term trainee will be graduating this summer. However, three current trainees will be going back to their countries to fully integrate themselves with a specific research program with the hope of returning with meaningful data for their thesis.

It is always gratifying to find out how much our trainees contribute to their countries, but it is also important to remember that they also enrich our programs here in the US. For example, this past semester we were fortunate to have two former trainees, Carlos Diaz-Granados and Karine Markosyan come through Atlanta and spend some time with us. During their stay, they both presented their work during AITRP/CFAR-sponsored talks at Emory. Their presentations have already stimulated other students here at Emory to think more globally and to become interested in international HIV research.

Having said that, I encourage you to let us know if you plan to come to (or via) Atlanta at any time. We can take advantage of your trip to benefit other students and trainees at Emory and the greater Atlanta community. This is a "value added" role that the AITRP plays at our institution.

In this issue of our newsletter we have decided to feature the summer experience of students at Emory who have partnered with our program to conduct their Global Field Experience. Finally, our featured long-term fellow is Karine Markosyan from Armenia. I hope you enjoy reading about the exciting work she is doing in her country. Enjoy!

CARLOS DEL RIO, MD

SUMMER INTERNSHIPS

An important aspect of our program has been the ability to allow students at Emory to partner with our program and "take to the field" for the summer in one of our collaborating countries. Hands on training, either to assist them with preparation of their thesis or in pursuit of future directions seem clearly beneficial to all parties involved. Below we have, from this past summer, some "stories from the field".

Tadessech and Taitu Hailu - Ethiopia

Tadessech Hailu and Taitu Hailu are natives from Ethiopia and second-year students in the Department of Global Health at the Rollins School of Public Health of Emory University. They obtained their bachelor's degree in Microbiology from Ohio Wesleyan University. During

the summer of 2004, they participated in HIV/AIDS research through a collaborative project between the Emory CFAR and the Federal Police Hospital (FPH) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. For their project, they reviewed the demographic characteristics and clinical presentations of over 10,000 individuals tested for HIV at the FPH between 1990 and 2004. Furthermore, they helped our AITRP in that country by training FPH clinicians and staff in the use of EpiInfo2000. Thus, our students became "AITRP faculty" for the summer and helped us strengthen our research capacity at the FPH.

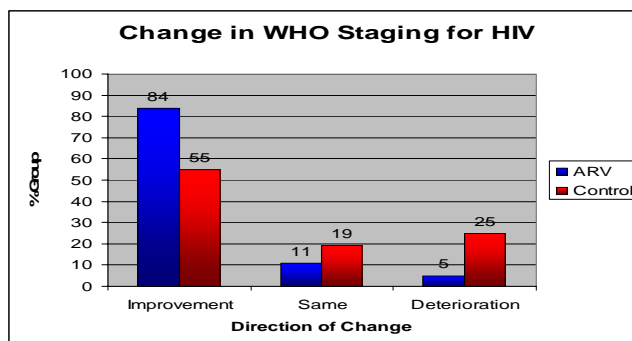


Joyce Au - Rwanda

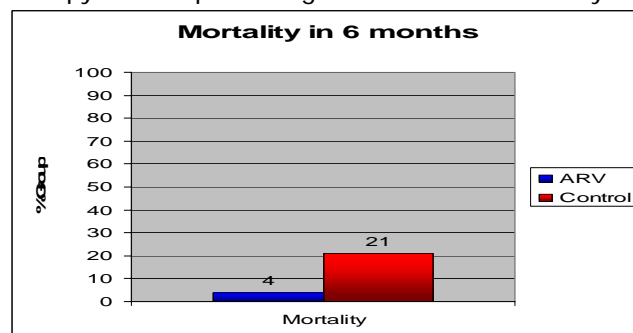
Joyce was a first-year medical student at Emory who, while taking a break from classes, and sitting in on a symposium on HIV/AIDS organized by the Emory CFAR and the AITRP, was struck and inspired by the presentation of Dr. Susan Allen. Admiring her unique and exciting research with discordant couples and Susan's honest, no-frills, and determined personality, Joyce approached her and "signed up" to spend her summer doing research with Dr. Allen's project in Rwanda. Her project looked at the clinical efficacy of generic antiretroviral drugs that had recently become available in Rwanda and at Project San Francisco through funding from the Global Fund.

Joyce's interest in this project was motivated by her desire to qualify and quantify how ARV therapy improved the health of HIV patients in Africa, but also to contribute evidence to counter the myth that generic ARV drugs were not as effective as the brand-name ones. For this study she compared the six month progress of ARV-treated patients to that of patients who never received ARV because it was not available at the time.

The results were clear, generic ARV therapy dramatically improved the health of HIV patients, saved lives, and raised CD4 counts. Furthermore, patient adherence was very high, thus minimizing the risk of developing drug resistance. Hence, the generic ARV being used in Rwanda are highly efficacious against HIV/AIDS. In practical terms, a generic ARV program can be implemented with success and a sustainable future.



Since ARV was relatively new in Rwanda, Joyce was also curious about the personal responses of the patients. Through interviews and a survey she designed, she explored their knowledge, attitude, and behavior. 97% knew the significance of a CD4 count - some even eloquently described it as "the soldiers that guard your health" and for 80% of patients ARV therapy allowed them to regain their ability to run a household and return to work key to earning a living. Thus, ARV therapy offered practical gains for the entire family.



Of interest to Joyce was the fact that 76% of the patients hesitated in accepting ARV therapy because they feared that it would increase their appetite while they would not have enough to eat. Food is scarce in Rwanda, and Joyce could see the awful ethical dilemma confronting these patients. Other interesting findings of her study was the fact that 98% of patients on ARV reported maintaining or increasing the practice of safe sex with condoms, thus decreasing the fear that wider use of AV therapy in Africa would encourage unsafe sexual behavior and increase transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Eighty-two percent were more willing to discuss about HIV and encourage others to be tested suggesting that wider ARV availability will help decrease stigma and promote wider HIV testing.



Top row: Dr. Susan Allen, Joyce Au, and Heena
Bottom row: Dr. Bekan and Ericka

Brenda Thompson - Mexico

Brenda's passion for international HIV started when she was working with HIV/AIDS programs on a community level in Zimbabwe. At that time, she decided that she would benefit if she pursued advanced training in public health and thus began her MPH as a student in the International Health Department at the Rollins School of Public Health. As a first year student she met Dr. Jennifer Hirsch, then the Associate Director of Emory's AITRP, and began to get interested in the role that societies and sexuality play in the dynamics of HIV transmission.

When Dr. Hirsch's proposal entitled "Love, Marriage and HIV" was funded by the NIH, Brenda jumped at the opportunity to work with Dr. Hirsch in the field in Degollado, Mexico. The purpose of her time in Mexico would be to begin project implementation and to develop ethnographic research skills and gather information to be used for her thesis.

Her six months in Degollado began in January 2004; however her own work did not begin immediately as her Spanish was not yet conversational. Her research focused on the courtship practices of unmarried women



(ages 14 and older). Sunday evenings were a key time for her research-wise, as that was the only night the disco was open. Even those single girls who were not allowed to go to the disco would get dressed up and go to the plaza.

Brenda will never forget her first Sunday evening when she accompanied two friends to the plaza. Dr. Hirsch had described

in her book (*A Courtship after Marriage*, based on her dissertation research she conducted in Degollado) how girls would walk around the plaza in one direction while single men would walk around in the opposite direction. Quite a few changes had taken place in Degollado since Dr. Hirsch last worked there, in particular with regard to the behavior of single women, so she was not sure if the *da una vuelta* (going around the plaza) was still in practice. But sure enough, as soon as she reached the corner, a group decision had to be made as to whether the group would *da una vuelta*, or go directly to their destination. During her six months of going out on Sundays, Brenda and her friends definitely chose to *da una vuelta* more often than not! After all, it is the perfect way to scope out who is out that night, and is the most socially acceptable way for singles to meet and chat in public.

Brenda also conducted in-dept interviews with sixteen young women in Degollado. It was incredibly interesting for her to conduct the interviews after having been in the town for five months, as a number of times she was told things in the interviews which were completely contradictory to the behavior she was witnessing in public. Living in a small, Catholic town in Mexico, single girls in Degollado know exactly what is expected of them, so while gossip runs rampant about who is doing what, with whom, very few of the women interviewed spoke openly about their own experiences with sexuality. Brenda learned that part of the art of qualitative research is addressing both what you observe people doing in social settings, and how they choose to present themselves to you in the more formal interview setting.

HIV/AIDS Spring Seminar Series

Our seminar series continued this spring again as a collaborative effort with AITRP, the Humphrey and Muskie fellows. Below is a list of speakers and topics.

Dr. William Philbrick, CARE, "Hope for African Children Initiative"

Dr. Carlos DiazGranados (*former AITRP trainee*), Fundación Universitaria de Ciencias de la Salud (FUCS), Columbia - "AIDS in Columbia"

Dr. Guido Silvestri, Emory Vaccine Center "Progress and Challenges in Developing a HIV Vaccine"

Dr. Karine Markosyan, (*former AITRP trainee*), Director of the Health Education Association, Yerevan, Armenia, The correlation between the human rights of Injecting Drug Users and the HIV Epidemic in Armenia".
Emory Vaccine Center Tour

Conference News...

Two former fellows presented at the 12th Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections (CROI) the most prestigious HIV meeting:

Miguel Cashat, MD - "Clinical Profile of HIV-infected Adolescents in Latin America: Preliminary Report of NICHD International Site Development Initiative Pediatric Study." (Poster #763)

Carlos DiazGranados, MD - "Rate and Predictors of Optimal Virologic Response to Antiretroviral Therapy in Columbia" (Poster #620)

You can find their abstract and posters at the conference website(<http://www.retroconference.org>)

Karine Markosyan, who is also our featured fellow this month, was given a scholarship to present at the **Health and Human Rights Conference** in Atlanta. The topic of her presentation was "Human Rights of Injection Drug Users and the HIV epidemic in Armenia".

Featured Fellow

Karine Markosyan (2000-2001)

When I was asked to be the "featured fellow", my first answer was that I am hardly appropriate for that, because my story is far from what could be called a "success story". But then I decided that sharing my experience with others could help them to meet challenges which life prepares for all of us.

In 2000, I came to Emory University Rollins School of Public Health to pursue an MPH and become a part of the AIDS International Training and Research Program (AITRP). I accepted the offer as an exceptional opportunity to enrich my knowledge and skills in the area of HIV/AIDS prevention. Although the epidemic in Armenia was still in its nascent phase, there was fertile soil for a generalized epidemic. I decided to dedicate myself to the prevention of the latter.

However, upon return to Armenia I was not offered a position which would allow me to do that and it was AITRP which came to support me in accomplishing my goal. During my fellowship, I worked together with my mentor: Dr. Ralph DiClemente, a well-known behavioral scientist at Emory University's RSPH, to develop a grant proposal for a pilot study of a HIV-risk reduction behavioral intervention for commercial sex workers in Armenia. Upon my return to Armenia, my proposal was funded as a re-entry grant which enabled me to implement the project.

The work has been done in collaboration with the National Center for AIDS Prevention of Armenia which was important for integrating the project into the National HIV Prevention Program. During this time I continued to receive mentoring and support from Dr. DiClemente and Dr. Hirsch. The findings of the study have already been presented at prestigious international conferences as well as submitted to a peer-reviewed journal. Based on the findings from the study, another Emory-Armenian collaborative grant proposal was developed and recently submitted for funding to the U.S. Civilian Research and Development Foundation (CRDF).

In 2004, I was able to secure a grant from the International Policy Fellowships Program of the Open Society Institute to carry out another HIV-related project. The purpose of the study was to identify those provisions of Armenian laws and policies which may contribute to the HIV-risk of injection drug users. As a result of the research, I have developed a number of policy recommendations for the promotion of public health approaches to the problem of injection drug use which may help Armenia meet the challenge of the HIV epidemic.

This month, April 2005, I returned to Atlanta where I had been invited to present at the conference entitled "Human-Rights Based Approaches to Health". During my visit to Atlanta, I also got to spend some time at Emory. Returning to Emory was a memorable event for me; it was like coming back home. I was once more hosted by the AITRP and allowed an opportunity to present my research during the AITRP's HIV/AIDS seminar. I gladly shared my experience with current AITRP, Humphrey and Muskie fellows, as well as other students and professors at the Rollins School of Public Health. My message to the current fellows was that an AITRP fellowship can grow into continuing support and sustainable collaboration and make a difference in their professional careers.

A MESSAGE from Maria...

Pardon our progress! As you'll notice, we're still making changes to update and improve our website. Please visit the site and send us more recent info to update your bio, let us know what you're doing, and let people who visit the website know how contact you.

This newsletter will continue to be posted on our website (www.sph.emory.edu) and the Fogarty website (<http://www.fic.nih.gov/news/inthenews.html>).

I am still interested in voluntary contributions to our newsletter, especially our "Featured Fellow" section. I'm excited and thank those who have contributed thus far; continue to keep us abreast of your news. We want to inform your fellow trainees of grants you've received, articles you've published, as well as personal successes. Email me at masulli@sph.emory.edu. I'll look forward to hearing from you.

Salud, Maria

IN THE NEWS....

Isabel Hernandez (one of our former fellows '2000-2001) delivered twins in February. Congratulations Isabel, Ricardo, and Alejandro on the new additions to the family – Arturo y Esteban!



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